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ABSTRACT

This booklet, which is intended as a support to the delivery of professional development of Australian literacy educators on critical literacy, presents a seven-step systematic model of all contexts through which a text may be constructed and studied. The first two sections discuss the model's use as a comprehensive framework for future teaching, learning, and assessment activities and the importance of viewing critical literacy as a generic learning ability that is valuable across the curriculum. Next, critical literacy is defined as the ability to look below a text's surface meanings by asking continuous questions of the text and thereby examine one's own values and attitudes and consider alternative positions and points of view. After a brief examination of the politics of text, the following seven contexts of text are listed and explained: situation, form, author(s), voices, genre, rhetorical strategies, and world view. Presented next are a set of questions for use in analyzing each context. The booklet's remaining four sections consist of definitions of the concepts of text, reading, and self-reflection and discussion of the following: the differences between implicit and explicit meaning, the pyramid of meaning; and differences between literacy and critical literacy. The booklet contains 26 references. (MN)

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Critical Literacy:

a Professional Development Resource

Dr Andrew Lohrey

THE NATIONAL LANGUAGES AND LITERACY INSTITUTE OF AUSTRALIA

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a Professional Development Resource

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a professional development resource

This Resource has been produced as a support to the delivery of professional development workshops on critical literacy. As a support document, this Resource is meant to act as a guide for teachers when developing and refining their own critical questions and close reading practices. There may be some statements and references in this Resource which appear too dense and in need of further clarification. This compactness of information relates to the purpose of this document. It is not possible, nor is it desirable, to clarify what may appear as difficult matters. To try and do so would be to fill a very large book. Rather, the purpose here is to provide background support material for workshop practices, for 'doing' critical literacy, which will then produce the necessary clarifications that come from a 'hands on' experience.

This Resource is aimed at developing some essential strategies and skills in students. These are critical literacy strategies which place the control of learning into the hands of students. How to ask questions of texts and what questions to ask is a much underrated skill that students need to learn, and to practice, in order to prepare them for the trials of life-long learning. These strategies of critical literacy stimulate learning and motivate students to explore and be receptive to the multiple meaning every texts contains.

This Resource is short but systematic without undue emphasis on one particular set of questions or context. The present integrated, comprehensive model covers, with even handedness, all contexts through which a text is constructed and studied. This systematic approach can be used as a generic model for developing critical literacy skills across all curriculum areas.

It should be noted that it is not always necessary to question texts critically, as proposed here. Even after becoming proficient in critical literacy we may still decide to read complicitly rather than for critical detachment.

in brief

Teaching and learning critical literacy skills is of vital importance for students in this information age. Without the development of these abilities, tomorrow's citizens will be unable to cope with an increasingly complex society, nor will they be able to actively and creatively participate in its decision making processes.

This support Resource does not put forward a 'correct' line on critical literacy nor does it provide examples of how critical literacy 'is done'. Each time it is done, it is done differently - there are no correct procedures, beyond how and what sorts of questions to ask. Developing critical literacy engages with the unique problem of empowering students to take control of their own learning. This is the problem of encouraging and stimulating receptivity and fostering openness to all texts.

Students do not need a great deal of knowledge about grammar, genre, voice, rhetorical strategies and world views before they undertake the close reading exercises of critical literacy proposed here. By using the present seven step model the technical content of grammar and genre, and so on, can be presented as part of the instruction associated with 'solving the problem' of text being analysed. This is the best way to learn content - as a feature of problem solving.

After completing PD workshops teachers may decide not to use the model of the seven contexts but use only one or two contexts to explore a particular question. For example, teachers of lower primary grades who want to discuss the various ways in which mothers are represented by using Mother's Day texts may look at these through the contexts of the author and voice. This selective use of context is a common feature of current teaching methods.

The benefit of the present systematic approach is that even when selectively used this seven step model provides a comprehensive framework for future teaching, learning and assessment activities. Evidence of achievement would relate to the texts under consideration as well as the proficiency with which students ask and answer questions and begin to take control over their own critical appreciation, comprehension and learning.

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across the curriculum

Australian Literacies is a Commonwealth document that promotes literacy as a broad-band ability that responds to personal, civic-cultural and economic needs. Critical literacy is important for enjoying literature, for success in vocational education and on-going educational pursuits as well as for actively participating in a democratic society. Critical literacy is also relevant for meeting the challenge of changing technologies that have effectively dissolved many communication barriers across the world.

The development of critical literacy needs to occur across the curriculum and in all Learning Areas. For example, critical literacy is central to the English curriculum. *A Statement on English for Australian Schools* has two strands: texts and language which comprises contextual understanding, linguistic structures and features and strategies. *The Curriculum Profile* refers to the modes of speaking, listening, reading, viewing and writing, all of which are directly related to the development of the generic features of critical literacy.

The Learning Areas of The Arts, Studies of Society and the Environment, Health and Physical Education explicitly refer to different forms of literacy both as goals of study and as a means of supporting other learning. Science and Mathematics statements infer that literacy is involved in the communication of these forms of information, while the Technology statement has a content strand for information.

Critical literacy is therefore not confined to English and literary texts, but represents a set of understandings and capabilities applicable to texts in all Learning Areas. Almost everything taught and learnt, from kindergarten to post-compulsory education, is concerned with a comprehension and understanding of texts. In this generalised sense, critical literacy is generic to all learning.

Importantly, critical literacy is a **generic learning** ability. A generic learning ability is one that has been developed in a range of different cross-curriculum learning contexts so that the ability belongs, not to a particular subject or content, but to the learner. A valuable generic ability of this kind is essential for successful learning transfer to occur in life-long learning situations.

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what is Critical Literacy?

Critical literacy is the ability to continually ask questions of a text (talking back to the text) in ways that enable us to look below the surface meanings to see how we are being influenced and affected. This critical ability helps us examine our values and attitudes and to consider alternative positions and points of view.

- "Literacy as a key capability for citizens to understand and influence changes within society becomes a critical feature of a robust, participatory democracy." (Joe Lo Bianco and Peter Freebody, 1997:11)
- Critical literacy develops self-reflection when we 'talk back to the text'. In such questioning the reader or writer becomes actively involve in the 'politics' of a text, that is, the who, what, why and how of the text's production. In this way readers, viewers and listeners are empowered to become active, self-reflective learners and as adults, to be responsive and involved citizens.
- Critical literacy improves reading comprehension, writing and communication.
- Critical literacy improves social interaction by making us aware of the hidden values, dispositions and attitudes that are usually taken-for-granted within ourselves and texts. These implicit, taken-for-granted fields of meaning are positive resources to be mined for greater understanding.
- Critical literacy assists us to evaluate the ways in which our forebears constructed their world and how we continue to re-construct it.
- Critical literacy enhances life-long learning which develops from learning by doing. "Students must be equipped not only with the *what* but also with the *how* to become productive problem solvers, mindful decision makers, and craftspersons of pride, with the freedom to flex and feel the flow and efficacy." (Fogarty: 1997, 78)

the politics of text

Critical literacy is the ability to continually ask questions of a text. This capacity for talking back to the text involves the reader or the writer in the 'politics' of text, that is, the who, what, why and how of the text's production.

The politics of text provides most of the meaning of a text so if we ignore this field of implicit meaning we diminish our understanding and comprehension of what we read or write. (See notes on meaning, pp 25, 26) This is what happens when we read complicitly – we forget about the politics of the text and only look at the surface meanings. (See relevant definitions: Reading, p 23) However, we discover something about the politics of text when we start to construct our own texts; writing, for example. Thus to comprehend texts we must learn to use the politics of text.

The approach of this Resource is to take the entire contextual field of a text's production, that is, the whole area of a text's politics and divide it into seven interrelated contexts. These seven contexts will then provide a set of specific focuses for asking direct and specific questions of the text.

These seven contexts relate to all texts, that is, they are the generic contexts through which all texts are constructed and by which they can be critically studied. (The model of the seven contexts appears on the next page). The first context relates to the actual classroom situation of studying a text (what is brought to a text) while the other six contexts relate to the implicit meanings embedded in the text (what a text contains).

The advantage of this holistic and contextual approach is that the seven contexts together encompass all aspects of a text's politics – what we bring to a reading and the conditions of a text's production. No context is ignored while no context and related set of questions is treated with bias or undue emphasis. This is a balanced model that when used fully used can test and bring to light all forms of persuasion and the values, attitudes and agendas embedded in any text.

the seven contexts of text

generic contexts

This is a model of the seven contexts of text. Questions from each of the contexts should be asked and discussed to fully develop a critical literacy. These seven contexts form an integrated, holistic and systematic approach that can be applied to any reading or writing, from kindergarten to post-compulsory education and even life-long learning. This seven context model is generic to all learning and can be applied to developing critical literacy across all subjects and Learning Areas.

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some points to note

When using this seven context approach for critical literacy it is not necessary to begin at step 1 and go through to step 7. This is not a lock-step approach. Rather, begin with the context and questions which seem most relevant to the particular text.

The sample questions provided in this Resource are guides for teachers to refine their own questions. In workshops it is expected that teachers will develop their own questions which will be relevant to their students.

Summary information about the seven contexts is found on page 12 through 22. This information should provide some background material for discussion and questions for each of the seven contexts.

It is important when asking questions of a text that we do not become over-engaged with the surface content of the text, that is, the explicit meaning. A strong focus on the explicit content through discussion, argument or justification is a complicit reading response and this will usually take attention away from questions about the contexts and conditions under which the text has been produced and constructed.

To engage in critical literacy by talking back to a text is to be relatively dispassionate and detached about the explicit content while being engaged, through a process of questions, with the 'politics' of the text.

But being dispassionate about the explicit content does not mean just asking superficial or tokenistic questions. To have a superficial response would be to simply ask for expressions of opinions or a statement about feelings. Such questions and requests usually close down discussion and pre-empt further questions. Critical literacy seeks to extend the process of questioning. Questions should therefore be open-ended and lead on to further discussion and questions, and also to the interconnection of different contexts.

the context of situation

The context of situation refers to the situation of beginning a lesson or the situation of solving a problem. This is the **learning context** for studying a text and involves the overall question of 'what are the meanings we bring to the text that is to be studied'?

There are two kinds of contextual and implicit meanings brought to the situation context. One is the **institution's expectations and aims**. This involves the teacher's desires and pedagogical viewpoint as well as the institution's objectives and outcome requirements. The second form of contextual meaning is the perspective, aims, agendas, expectations and anxiety which the **student brings to the text**.

The first kind of implicit meaning can be addressed directly by the teacher through question and discussion directed at informing students of course requirements and teacher expectations. The second kind of implicit meaning can sometimes be more difficult to address as it involves the ability of students to **self-assess**. (See self-reflection, p 19) This will vary. Gender can be a related factor with boys generally finding it more difficult.

Students should feel comfortable with the learning situation. Students should be familiar with the reasons they are there and the nature of the **demands and expectations** placed upon them by this institutional situation. The context of situation may also refer to the need to **identify the problem** or activity to be undertaken. Identifying the problem often means discussing conditions and framing a plan for a solution.

The implicit meaning which students bring to the learning situation by way of emotion, disposition, agenda, attitude and values is central to their ability to learn. If they are anxious, fearful, sleepy, hungry or in love then learning anything will be difficult. Judging how to address this kind of meaning is a cultivated capability. But bringing to light what students bring to a text (of which they themselves are usually unaware) should not be treated as wasting time but as a positive that requires some explicit and critical learning exercise.

Here are some sample questions which could be asked and answered individually, or co-operatively by teachers and students:

- what are we expected to do and why? what are the hidden agendas?

- are there any right or wrong answers?
- are we allowed to express opinions? in what form?
- how are we to be marked and assessed? what are the criteria for success?
- how do I feel about the openness of critical literacy?
- what are the risks in this learning situation?
- what is the problem at hand? (if there is a problem to be solved)
- what are the conditions of this problem?

the context of form

Students need explicitly to know and to reflect upon the reasons they are investigating a particular text and how this text relates to others they may have studied. In addition, they need to be informed about why the educational institution and the wider community sees the text as **relevant** The text's form therefore relates to subject outcomes as well as to the questions raised in the context of situation.

To become proficient in critical literacy, students need to become writers and readers in a range and **diversity of text forms**. This range and diversity relate to the student's experience of and development through texts as well as to a diversity of textual forms, that is, literary, mass media, scientific, educational, every day texts, and so on. Range and diversity also relate to the manner of the student's participation: reading, writing, speaking, listening, using videos, audio tapes, computers, painting, drawing, mime, etcetera.

An important set of questions in this context relates to the **explicit messages of the text** (sometimes called the ostensible or surface meaning of a text. See notes on meaning, pp 25, 26). The explicit message represents the conventional concerns for reading comprehension. The explicit messages will involve such features as: text type, genre, topic, subject matter organisation, structure, characterisation, action and plot. **Text type** refers to such categories as exposition, argument, report, procedure, narrative and so on.

Discussion and reflection on the explicit messages of a text should be undertaken with a view to exploring their main features.

Some sample questions are:

- why are we studying this text now?
- how does this text relate to other texts studied?

- what is the explicit or surface topic of this text?
- what is the cultural setting of the topic/story?
- what are the key points/events of the topic/story?
- what issues does the text raise?
- (in fiction) how do the characters relate to plot, action, events and each other?
- what are the decisions made by the main characters in the story?
- describe the structure: plot, action, events.
- summarise the topic/story.
- how is the reader positioned to read this text?
- could the story have been written differently? show how.

the context of author(s)

Every text has an author or authors – every book, painting, musical score or film has an author. Even a page in a newspaper is authored by an editor(s) who, like film directors, makes decisions about who and what is to be given prominence or marginalised. The author context therefore refers to a text's **principal organisational processes**.

In most written narratives the author is named as the producer of the text. In some other kinds of writing, grammatical strategies are developed to erase this context. The reasons for **hiding the context of the author** are as many as the grammatical and rhetorical strategies which produce this kind of erasure. The pretence that there is no author maybe due to an academic style which promotes the myth of objectivity. In these cases often 'we', 'you' and 'one' are favoured over the more personal 'I'. Sometimes the active agent is dropped altogether as in "It was found that. . .'. Often educational material is presented to students as un-authored for the purpose of appearing objective and unbiased. Sometimes interviews in criminal cases are fabricated by hiding the true author and substituting the name of the accused. The reasons for hiding the context of the author are many and varied, yet while the purposes can vary, the rhetorical effect is always the same – to persuade the reader to **accept the authority of the text** (usually as a single and de-contextual reading) by reducing and closing off reflective questions.

The author context also involves questions about the concept of **ambiguity**. Ambiguity is a puzzle of meaning. Every text contains ambiguities and so every text

is full of puzzles. A key question is: 'how does the author use ambiguity?' Ambiguity may be controlled through the use of analogy, pun, irony, satire, metaphor or some other 'figure of speech'. But ambiguity is often uncontrolled owing to a confusion in: i) what the author wants to say, ii) the form of expression used, and iii) the author's expectations about the knowledge the reader brings to the text.

The author context also relates to **values** associated with **gender, ethnicity and culture** as well as to the cross-context questions of voice, genre, world view and rhetoric. As in all critical literacy, it is important always to justify the details about the author by evidence in the text. For example, there is no use saying that ambiguity is uncontrolled or the gender or cultural background of the author is important if these claims are not backed up by textual evidence.

Some sample questions are:

- who is the author(s)?
- is authorship hidden? if so, identify the strategies of erasure?
- is the gender or cultural background of the author important? if so why?
- why is it in the interests of the author to produce this text?
- where in the text is ambiguity controlled or uncontrolled? justify by evidence.
- what effect do the uncontrolled ambiguities have on the text? justify by evidence.
- what other authors could have produced this text and how could they have organised this text differently?
- what values, emphases and agendas would you change if you were the author?

the context of voice

Every text of any length contains several voices. A voice is a **mode of address** – it is the voice you hear 'in your head' when reading or writing a passage. The sound of a voice is achieved through tone, pace, qualification, authority. Voices are especially evident in fiction but they exist in all texts.

As a mode of address a **voice implies a receiver**, a 'listener' reader, usually a complicit reader. A complicit and ideal reader position is established by accepting, without undue question, the mode of address deployed by the author.

All texts contain the voices of the author(s). In literature this can be the voice

of the narrator, although sometimes authors create the character of narrators for a particular effect. Characters in stories also have voices. The degree to which these voices seem authentic relates to how true they sound, how different they are from each other and how stereotypical they are. **Authentic voices** can also relate to how complex they are and how much control the author has over his or her characters.

Voices usually have several ingredients. For example, two common modes of address are the voices of **authority** and **seduction**. The voice of authority is **categorical** and unqualified while the voice of seduction can be qualified in ways that are **insinuating**. The voice of an author need not consistently be one or the other but can change from authority to seduction or combine with some other ingredient such as, **formality** and **informality**. Sometimes an author will not have control over his or her voices for they come out of the depths of the author's own repressed reservoirs of implicit meaning. In this **ambiguous form** they can represent the voices of fear, anxiety, desire, hidden agendas or personal ambitions. Texts therefore tend to have a chorus or 'polyphony' of voices.

Many headlines and much news reporting in newspapers use the voices of fear and anxiety to shout authorless imperatives at readers. Some newspaper columns, radio programs and political speeches will affect the moderating voice of common sense by simply marginalising dissenting voices.

Voices usually have several ingredients and are affected by ambiguity, cultural setting, social convention, geographic location, religious conviction, the genre in which they exist, the rhetoric they use and, importantly, by **gender**. The multiplicity of voices in a text needs to be identified and discussed in terms of the variety of influences that affect and create them.

Some sample questions are:

- how many voices can you hear in the text?
- to whom do these voices belong?
- what effects do different voices appear to have on the reader?
- is the author in control of all the voices in this text? justify by text evidence.
- what do the voices in the text sound like? describe their features.
- are these voices authentic or stereotypical? justify by text evidence.
- which sub-culture or ethnic group do these voices come from?
- what are the most important influences on each voice? justify by text evidence.

the context of genre

The term 'genre' has had a long history in literary studies and describes the formal features of literary texts – epitaph, novel, sonnet, epic and so on. When applied to education and literacy, genre takes on the conditions of its social production. These are: the **social occasion** in which a text is used; the **institutional conditions** which contextualise the social occasion; the **tasks** which are determined by the institution; and the behavioural **sub-culture** which emerges from the other three.

An example of the conditions of social production is the following: beginning in the early years of primary school (the institution and social occasion) a child is presented with various subject-related tasks which will demand a specialised sub-set of rules for expression. These subject-tasks will reflect the specialised sub-culture of the subject and will require an appropriate set of expressions. For example, the task of doing a project on the history of Australian exploration will demand a different set of expressions to a project in science or creative writing. This process of specialisation will continue through secondary and post-compulsory education so that eventual mastery and initiation into a discipline is achieved by a mastery of the genre relevant to the social conditions of the discipline.

The behavioural sub-culture of a discipline is established by social interactive habits that have a relatively stable history. Thus the sub-culture of police work establishes the genre of 'police-speak' and the sub-culture of the legal profession establishes 'legalese' and the sub-culture of the mall establishes 'youth speak' and so on. Each of these sub-cultures has its own vocabulary but genre goes well beyond a specialised vocabulary to embrace how the reader is positioned, the voice, how the author is rendered, rhetorical strategies and, often, the world view.

Also relevant to genre is **text types**. For example, exposition, argument, report and narrative are text types that are used by different institutions for different purposes. The linking of text type to a particular social occasion and institution has developed through socialisation and rules of etiquette. Thus writing a narrative for a job application not only shows inappropriate behaviour but indicates an ignorance of genre.

The final factor affecting genre is **time**. Sub-cultures change with time and thus so do institutional tasks, text types, social occasions and, therefore, genres.

The genre of a text needs to be identified by discussing the institutional and social conditions of the text's production with further elaboration on the relevant text type, the polyphony of voices, the reader position, the rhetorical strategies and the world view. Some sample questions are:

- what is the genre of the text?
- what are the institutional and social conditions of the genre?
- what is the text type used in the genre?
- what are some of the sub-cultural values of the genre?
- how and what other contexts affect the genre?
- rewrite part of the text so that you situate it within a similar but different genre.

the context of rhetorical strategies

Every text contains rhetorical strategies that attempt to **persuade** the reader of the **truth(s)** that the text proclaims. In fiction this is usually more obvious than in non-fiction. The rhetorical strategies of texts are often story telling or **narrative strategies**. Narrative strategies are those that tell a story (or part of a story) with heroes and villains. Any text type that is persuasive will usually make use of some kind of narrative strategy.

To ask questions about rhetoric and narrative is to accept that texts are constructed to persuade and are not the direct, opaque and unmediated reflections of an objective and true reality or experience.

To discover how persuasion takes place we need to look at the **grammatical forms** which construct and render the rhetoric. A knowledge of the technologies of grammar is necessary, not as an end in itself, but as a means by which rhetorical strategies are brought to light and used. Grammar is thus never separated from the author's purpose to persuade and therefore it is never distinct from the rhetorical strategies it always constructs. In other words, grammatical form directly produces rhetorical strategies. It is therefore impossible to have an objective grammar without constructing some kind of persuasive strategy.

The job of bringing to light a text's particular rhetorical strategy is a developed skill but students can be assisted by directing questions at the mechanisms of

persuasion. These are: i) **the micro; grammatical constructions** and: ii) **the macro; narrative strategies**. These two are not separated but integrated - grammatical forms providing the micro structure for the larger narrative picture. For example, if authorship is denied but the voice is authoritative, the denial and the authority may be manifest through various grammatical forms - use of third person pronoun, agentless phrases, identificational verb 'to be', etcetera. Such denial/authority could be part of the rhetoric of a chronicle or a fairy tale, or it could be an element in a story about self promotion which appears as an objective academic paper.

Rhetorical strategies will vary according to the story being told. Students need to question and discuss grammatical forms in terms of their production of rhetorical and narrative strategies.

Some sample questions are:

- what is the truth(s) which this text constructs?
- how are we asked to accept this truth(s)?
- is there a story in the text or behind the text?
- who is the villain and who is the hero?
- how is the author, narrator or character embedded in the text?
- how is the genre constructed by the rhetoric?
- how is ambiguity, authority and certainty constructed?
- how is metaphor, simile, parody, irony or humour employed?
- is the author in control of the rhetoric used? justify by text evidence.

the context of world view

All texts carry and develop a **world view**. A world view is a broad and all-embracing cultural perspective which is produced by a series of **'master' narratives** that have long histories. The orthodox master narratives of the Western world are rational/empirical narratives which tend to promote splits and separations in knowledge by **dualistic** and **objective** methods. These narratives also tend to have a focus on explicit and differential meaning. The non-orthodox master narratives of the West integrate knowledge and practice, focus on interconnections and transformations and tend to be **self-reflective** and **holistic** in structure. Broadly, these two are the world views of Newtonian science and ecological complexity, that is, views that are objective or self-reflexive.

An example of these world views is in the way we conceive of a text. For example, a text is not an object. It is a process. It is the process of reading, writing, speaking, listening and understanding. It is the dynamic result of a communication act. Also texts are not constructed by private individuals. Nor are they constructed only by social and linguistic conventions. **A text is a co-creation** - a shared process, constructed from social and linguistic conventions as well from an individual's personal pyramid of meaning. A text is thus a non-dualistic set of dynamic processes. To discover a text's secret, implicit meaning is to be good at critical literacy. To be good at critical literacy is to be open to the co-created character of texts. This conception of texts presents a non-dualistic, holistic world view and it is held in place by its key features - **self-generation and self-reflection**.

Texts that induce self-reflection formally, habitually or incidentally produce holistic, non-dualistic perspectives while providing support for the development of critical literacy. Texts that inhibit, deny, erase or close off self-reflection are texts which produce dualistic logic, the separation and fragmentation of knowledge and the objective world view. These texts dissect the observer from the observed, intellect from emotion, I from thou, language from the world, assessment from learning, language from thinking and the individual from society.

Educational texts aimed at filling up the passive student with a quantity of explicit content, correct answers, axiomatic knowledge and de-contextual learning induce a fragmented and objective world view. This perspective cannot and does not relate well to implicit meaning, contexts, self-reflection or critical literacy.

Students need to identify the text's perspective and justify their conclusions by evidence from the text.

Some sample questions are:

- what is the world view of the text?
- is the text self-reflective? how is self-reflection achieved?
- is the text non-self-reflective? provide examples.
- how is non self-reflection achieved?
- is the text's world view evident through its genre and/or rhetorical strategies?
- how is this world view different from, or similar, to mine?
- what world view would I use and why?

summation of questions

The Context of Situation

- what are we expected to do and why? what are the hidden agendas?
- are there any right or wrong answers?
- are we allowed to express opinions? in what form?
- how are we to be marked and assessed? what are the criteria for success?
- how do I feel about the openness of critical literacy?
- what are the risks in this learning situation?
- what is the problem at hand? (if there is a problem)
- what are the conditions of this problem?

The Context of Form

- why are we studying this text now?
- how does this text relate to other texts studied?
- what is the explicit or surface topic of this text?
- what is the cultural setting of the topic/story?
- what are the key points/events of the topic/story?
- what issues does the text raise?
- (in fiction) how do the characters relate to plot, action, events and each other?
- what are the decisions made by the main characters in the story?
- describe the structure: plot, action, events.
- summarise the topic/story.
- how is the reader positioned to read this text?
- could the story have been written differently? show how.

The Context of Author(s)

- who is the author(s)?
- is authorship hidden? if so, identify the strategies of erasure?
- is the gender or cultural background of the author important? if so why?
- why is it in the interests of the author to produce this text?
- where in the text is ambiguity controlled or uncontrolled? justify by evidence.
- what effect do the uncontrolled ambiguities have on the text? justify by evidence.
- what other authors could have produced this text and how could they have

organised this text differently?
- what values, emphases and agendas would you change if you were the author?

The Context of Voice

- how many voices can you hear in the text?
- to whom do these voices belong?
- what effects do different voices appear to have on the reader?
- is the author in control of all the voices in this text? justify by text evidence.
- what do the voices in the text sound like? describe their features.
- are these voices authentic or stereotypical? justify by text evidence.
- which sub-culture or ethnic group do these voices come from?
- what are the most important influences on each voice? justify by text evidence.

The Context of Genre

- what is the genre of the text?
- what are the institutional and social conditions of the genre?
- what is the text type used in the genre?
- what are some of the sub-cultural values of the genre?
- how and what other contexts affect the genre?
- rewrite part of the text so that you situate it within a similar but different genre.

The Context of Rhetoric

- what is the truth(s) which this text constructs?
- how are we asked to accept this truth(s)?
- is there a story in the text or behind the text?
- who is the villain and who is the hero?
- how is the author, narrator or character embedded in the text?
- how is the genre constructed by the rhetoric?
- how is ambiguity, authority and certainty constructed?
- how is metaphor, simile, parody, irony or humour employed?
- is the author in control of the rhetoric used? justify by text evidence.

The Context of World View

- what is the world view of the text? provide examples.
- is the text self-reflective? how is self-reflection achieved?
- is the text non-self-reflective?
- how is non self-reflection achieved?
- is the text's world view evident through its genre and/or rhetorical strategies?
- how is this world view different from, or similar, to mine?
- what world view would I use and why?

relevant definitions

Text:

A text is any expression, written, spoken, drawn, painted or shown. A text can be a book, a paragraph, a video, fish and chips, a flag, a sentence, the instructions a teacher gives to the class – any coherent system of symbols is a text. In the English Statement a text includes the texts of literature, mass media and everyday texts and can be written, spoken or visual. The term, 'text' therefore crosses all discipline and curriculum boundaries and every Learning Area.

A text is always a co-creation; it is culturally symbolic as well as being a personal construct that encapsulates a particular constellation of social, moral, political and personal meanings. Critical literacy is concerned with reading the multiple meanings – the polyphony – which make up every text.

Reading:

Reading is an active process of construction and re-construction of meaning. A reader is an active agent who carries out these processes. In terms of meaning all readings fall into two broad categories. For learning both are important and interrelated.

The first type of reading is designed to **duplicate meaning** by accurately reflecting the text's surface patterns of information and its explicit and ostensible messages. This kind of reading can be called an ideal or complicit reading – the reader acts complicitly to replicate, with a high degree of fidelity, surface messages and the text's explicit information. In education, this form of reading involves training in a variety of skills such as, visual, syntactic and phonic processing; 'code-cracking' skills such as, spelling, punctuation, grammar and vocabulary, and a text participant understanding of surface messages. Complicit and ideal readings are usually taught and tested through instrumental, instructional methods. Such readings assume the possibility of an accurate replication of objective, and at times, universal and unbiased texts.

A second kind of reading is designed to **construct meaning** by critically talking back to the text. A critical reading has a focus on constructing meaning by transforming implicit and contextual meanings that are embedded in all texts. To transform implicit meaning is to change the implicit into an explicit form.

This kind of transformational reading constructs meaning by turning the implicit into explicit expression. The seven contexts that construct all texts and which are used in this Resource represent the contextual, implicit meanings of texts. Making meaning is brought about by asking a series of critical questions of each of these contexts. **Critical literacy is thus a reading of the multiple 'hidden messages' of a text.** The comprehension of this kind of critical reading involves unfolding, discussing and qualifying values, agendas, perspectives, predispositions and attitudes. From this view the explicit message of a text represents only the immediately observed set of meanings. Reading the multiple meanings of any text is a critical exercise that creates a deeper understanding of texts and their social conditions as well as developing a knowledge and appreciation of self as reader.

Self-reflection:

Critical literacy is literacy that involves self-reflection. This means that we cannot develop a critical literacy in anything unless we understand what it is we bring to a text as well as what is hidden in the seven contexts of the text. Reading complicitly does not assist our understanding, self-reflection or critical literacy. Reading by talking back to the text involves an active re-construction of what is implied in the contexts of a text. The implicit meanings in a text are co-created, that is, created by the writer and re-created by the reader. These meanings are also often co-valued, that is, the values of the reader complicitly coincide with the socio-cultural values embedded within the text. Talking back to a text thus involves a self-reflective 'teasing out' of these values and contextual meanings.

Self-reflection is not about giving oneself a mark on a scale of 1 – 5 at the end of term. Self-reflection always involves a continual and infinite series of questions during the learning process. These questions are directed at both the text being analysed and the individual's values and processes of analysis. Self-reflection can be inhibited by teachers who simply ask for an expression of opinion or a single definitive answer such as a yes/no answer. Both these practices tend to close off questions about the text and also inhibit self-reflective processes. It is therefore important in developing critical literacy to stimulate inquiry into the values of the text and the values of students through a process of continual questing. Such questions should be of the open-ended and discursive kind.

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notes on the two kinds of meaning

There are two types of meaning (and therefore knowledge) constructed in texts. These two types of meaning are implicit and explicit meaning. All symbolic meaning-making, all reading and writing and all texts combine these two.

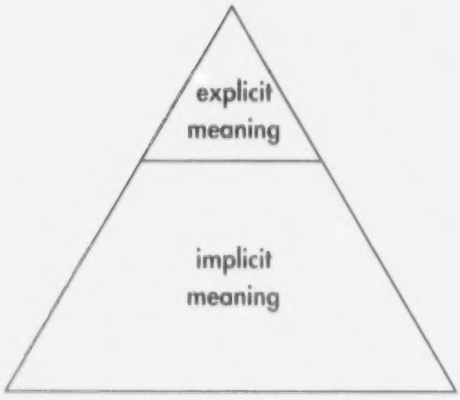
In symbolic systems such as a text **explicit meaning** is constructed by and through the observed, visible and differential marks of the system. Linguists refer to these marks as signifiers. In verbal and written expression these are the letters of the alphabet and the words of sentences. In the case of visual images explicit meaning refers to the lines, colours or contrasts of light and shade which construct the image. With mime, explicit meaning represents the actual observed movements of the body.

An explicit reading of a text is one that has a focus on the surface or ostensible, content. Ostensible readings are those that deal with constituents, what many often call 'facts'. Facts represent a 'bit' of explicit meaning (a constituent) and quite often they are seen to 'stand alone' as in sets, unconnected in any significant way to their implicit contextual background. In education, the concept of fact is often set against that of fiction which is seen as illusion, appropriate to English but not for Science.

Implicit meaning refers to all that meaning which is hidden from immediate observation. This kind of meaning is always contextual and comes in the form of (i) the social meaning of conventions, traditions, institutional protocols and linguistic habits that are embedded within every expression, along with (ii) the values hopes, desires, agendas and world views of the author and the reader. Implicit meaning therefore involves a union of the social and the personal through the marriage of cultural convention and individual habit.

It is important to note that there are no strict boundaries between implicit and explicit meaning and so they can never be separated as if they were rooms in a house or two polar opposites. They are always integrated in the way that constituents are always integrated into their contexts. Visible, manifest and explicit meaning (constituents) therefore always emerge from, and are thus transformed by, their contextual backgrounds.

the pyramid of meaning



The pyramid of meaning indicates the general balance, integration and hierarchical order between explicit and implicit meaning. These relationships operate for every sign, symbol and form of representation. For example, whenever we construct a text by writing, reading, viewing, listening or speaking, or in some other way, the largest proportion of the meaning we construct will be hidden, implicit and contextual. Explicit meaning will be visible, observed and differential and will therefore make up the smaller part of all texts. We can therefore say that contextual, implicit meaning is the foundation of all explicit meaning and this hierarchal order does not change under any condition.

The purpose of critical literacy is not to try and change the proportions or the hierarchical order of *the pyramid of meaning*. Rather, it is to make the permanent foundations of the pyramid – that is, the implicit contextual meaning involving both the learner's own values, attitudes, dispositions and desires along with the social contexts of the text's production – more flexible and accessible to conscious and explicit use. In practice this means the learner gains a critical access to the cultural, social, linguistic and personal contextual meanings associated with, and inherent in, all texts. The reverse of critical literacy is therefore to leave the text's and the learner's contextual foundations unquestioned so they remain inflexible, inhibited and generally inaccessible to conscious, explicit use – in other words, a teaching and learning practice which, because of pedagogy, ignores or devalues context, interest, view-point, values and world view of student, teacher and text. Such practices do not empower students but keeps them passive and compliant.

literacy and critical literacy

The present approach to critical literacy views it as 'talking back to the text', the process of asking questions of the text to uncover its many buried, implicit meanings. This process of questioning applies to all texts. This approach is thus interdisciplinary and in this regard is in agreement with *Australian Literacies* which "locates literacy policy at the heart of educational efforts, regardless of the nominated domain or discipline of interest."(Joe Lo Bianco and Peter Freebody 1997:75)

The emphasis on 'talking back to the text' makes critical literacy a cultural accomplishment. This social ability has to build on the basic organisational reading strategies developed in primary school. Reading becomes organised in the first two or three years of school when the child develops complex strategies for cue-finding, cue-using, choosing, checking and correcting its reading. These are the strategies a child needs for efficient reading in order to access meaning and for problem-solving new words and messages. These basic questioning strategies of meaning and text organisation are the essential foundations for the development of critical literacy.

The differences between these basic strategies of meaning and text organisation, developed in primary school, and the interrogative strategies of critical literacy are differences of degree rather than kind. These two reading abilities are interlinked by the frameworks of 'development' and 'maturation'. Attainment of the basic organisational processes of reading is necessary for early literacy development, but as children gain greater ability to generalise, they do so by using more complex forms of their basic organisational strategies. There is no break between the two, nor is there a shift into some new dimension.

Thus when students begin to 'talk back to the text', they do so by extending the questioning strategies they have already learnt in primary school. The change is from an understanding of the formal process of reading to an understanding of the social and cultural processes of reading. The critical ability to employ social conventions and cultural protocols is the necessary second step of literacy so that all students can actively participate in work, community and democracy.

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